

a research report prepared by acirrt, university of Sydney
for the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH & SAFETY FOR NEWS MEDIA WORKERS

JOURNALISTS, PHOTOGRAPHERS,
GRAPHIC ARTISTS, CAMERA &
SOUND CREWS



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Any errors or omissions are my own.

Justine Evesson
Senior Researcher
acirrt
February 2005

DANGER: JOURNALISTS AT WORK

Get the story. It's a basic tenet of journalism but there are many dangers associated with simply doing your job. Increasingly journalists are becoming the story as they strive to get closer to breaking news in dangerous environments or are targeted as they go about their duty. But office-working conditions, long drives, technology and equipment and long hours, deadlines, stress – all play a part in creating an unsafe environment for media workers.

In 2002 the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance identified the need for the drafting of a safety code specifically for media workers including photographers, graphic artists, camera and sound crews as well as journalists. The Alliance noted that unsafe work situations confront journalists in their daily work, particularly when reporting wars, bush fires, even political events and court cases.

And so the Alliance commissioned this project through a WorkCover New South Wales Assistance Grant with aim of creating the basis for a journalists' safety code akin to the other codes relevant to Alliance members: the Film Industry Safety Code and Safety Guidance Notes for the Entertainment Industry. The University of Sydney's research and training arm, acirrt, conducted the focus groups to attain an independent perspective.

The project identifies the occupational health and safety issues facing media workers and provides a platform for addressing some of the issues. This report will form the basis for a review of the use of the international journalists' safety code, particularly its relevance in the Australian context.

The Alliance thanks the ABC and its occupational health and safety adviser for organising the participants; also SBS and particularly Cathy Carey; the many rural organisers who have participated in the project. We also thank Justine Evesson from acirrt for developing the project and writing the report. And our thanks to WorkCover for their support.

Christopher Warren
Federal Secretary
Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH & SAFETY FOR NEWS MEDIA WORKERS: JOURNALISTS, PHOTOGRAPHERS, GRAPHIC ARTISTS, CAMERA & SOUND CREWS

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

acirrt was commissioned by the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance (the Alliance) in late 2002 to conduct a study of the primary risks to occupational health and safety (OH&S) for media workers. The purpose of this research is to explore key risks to health and safety as seen by media workers and to record their ideas about possible solutions to OH&S problems. It is by no means an exhaustive study of the health and safety issues within the industry, rather it provides a platform from which more detailed studies might be launched.

Our key research questions within that context are:

- What are the main risks to the occupational health and safety of media workers?
- What can be done to eliminate or mitigate those risks?

1.2 Research method and practice

Five focus groups were conducted using a protocol of questions developed in conjunction with officers of the Alliance. The focus groups included participants from the following occupations, general geographic areas and organisations:

- Metropolitan news print journalists, photographers, sub-editors and graphic artists
- Regional news print, television and radio journalists
- ABC television journalists, camera and sound recordists
- SBS television and radio journalists

Not all news media workers were represented. Noteworthy exceptions include metropolitan commercial television and radio journalists, journalists and photographers working on specialist publications and print media freelancers. This should be taken into consideration when reading the report.

Focus groups were attended by no more than nine in each group. Overall, 36 participants were involved in focus groups that on average went for two hours. Each focus group was tape recorded and partially transcribed to identify trends and the critical issues of risk

according to participants.

1.3 Reading the report

The report deals firstly with the main contributing factors to occupational health and safety risks as they were identified in the focus groups. We have done this rather than reporting back on responses to each of the protocol questions in each of the focus groups. This is due to the often multi-dimensional nature of our findings as well as the inherent nature of focus groups which move beyond strict question and answer structures. It also reflects common concerns across focus groups, organisations and across occupations. The report has, wherever, possible used quotes from the focus group participants. To guarantee the anonymity of participants they are only identified within the report by their primary occupation. Ideas about how to eliminate or mitigate those risks were understandably less well developed and more difficult for participants to enunciate. However, those ideas that were expressed are also outlined.

The report concludes by summarising the key issues that emerged from the focus group discussions.

2. MAIN CONTRIBUTORS TO INCREASING RISK AS IDENTIFIED BY FOCUS GROUPS

Participants talked about a wide range of factors impacting upon worker health and safety. Some issues were specific to particular occupations whilst others appeared to exist across all occupations reported on.

Work related factors that participants regarded as bearing risk have been divided into four basic groupings:

1. Work activities: the things that people did, or actions that they took to perform their jobs;
2. Work conditions: exposure to environmental factors and conditions during the course of their work;
3. Employment arrangements: the management of working hours and staffing levels, and the impact of those arrangements;
4. Employment relationships: the state of informal relations between workers and managers, and the use of contingent workers.

Some issues could be equally at home under more than one topic area. Wherever possible, the report sorts issues by the relevance as stressed by the participants who discussed them.

2.1 Work activities

Participants identified a small set of tasks that had a negative impact on worker health and safety. This is not to say that all other work activities had no risk, rather that these were the tasks that were singled out during focus groups. Carrying heavy loads, generally undertaken by camera crews and photographers, was regarded as a well-known cause of musculoskeletal damage. Travelling for work was undertaken by almost all of the participants and was regarded as a risky part of the job, particularly when combined with other factors like fatigue, stress, poor vehicles, poor conditions and dangerous environments. Covering sensitive or dangerous stories, a task undertaken by many participants, was also described repeatedly across the groups as having a negative impact on both health and in some cases safety.

2.1.1 Carry heavy loads and manual handling

It is well established that good standards and procedures

for lifting and carrying are important when heavy loads are being manually handled by workers. Photographers and television crews, in particular, have significant exposure to injury risk from working with heavy equipment. Participants spoke of injuries to backs and necks in particular.

Carrying equipment around can be a safety problem. Photographers have to carry a camera plus a couple of lenses, tripod, laptop – the equipment can be really heavy. (Photographer)

All this stuff is really heavy. There is so much of it. If you are going away on a job for a long while you've got to take everything with you – everything...85% of the job is lugging equipment around and now we carry the same gear around with fewer people. (Camera operator)

People get bad backs. Some people do and some people don't. I keep fit to try and avoid it... (Camera operator)

I carry an injury...it crept up on me over time – from a mix of things like carrying stuff wherever you go and shooting in awkward positions. You get a weakness and it's almost impossible to fix it. It doesn't happen to everyone but when it does happen to you it can lay you low for a long time. I still get work on my neck regularly – which I pay for. (Camera operator)

2.1.2 Travelling

Participants described the dangers of travelling in a variety of vehicles and under a number of circumstances. In particular, concerns were expressed over travelling for long distances and durations without adequate rest or time for recovery, and travelling under pressure to achieve deadlines and get the story first.

The pressure to get a story was regarded by some as inhibiting common sense when it comes to personal safety and, in some cases, the safety of others. Participants recounted examples of knowingly travelling in unsafe conditions.

I had the helicopter ride from hell once. A light plane had just crashed into the side of a mountain during a storm. Because it was blustery, rainy weather we had to hug the coast and had to fly very low because the pilot was so worried about it. We've landed right next to the plane crash site because it was the only place to land. And the chopper pilot's saying, 'We should never have done this. This is crazy.' But I'd insisted, you know. 'No, we can do this. Come on, come on.' Unbelievable. It was the worst experience ever. Shocking. But we went. But it was

my judgement. I could have said, 'No, we're not going,' but I didn't. Can't blame {the employer} for that one. (Other participant: But maybe they should have stopped you from going.) Yeah, I suppose that's right. (Journalist)

...photographers have had accidents on the way to accident scenes because they are under pressure to get there first and get the big picture and a lot of the time a journalist is with them so you're relying on them {the photographers} to be the safe driver. (Journalist)

Several participants were concerned about the number of hours being spent driving for stories. The following quotes describe some of the long hours spent behind the wheel while fatigued.

There was a young journalist and a photographer sent down the coast to find someone for a case study. It was a really specific kind of person they needed to find, and they weren't able to do it. They were told by their {manager} that the paper wouldn't pay for them to stay anywhere, so they drove back after a long day and got home at 3am. (Journalist)

You often find yourself doing a ridiculous amount of driving – I did a one day round trip to Young with a photographer, which I realise now was just too far in one day. (Journalist)

Although some organisations had rules about distances being travelled in a day before an overnight rest was required, participants felt the guidelines were inadequate. In other workplaces there were no specific guidelines and cases were dealt with by management as they arose.

Long hours of driving can be a problem – I know we must drive for longer than is safe. We need guidelines about how far it's safe to drive in a day, and the company needs to commit to paying for us to stay overnight somewhere rather than expecting us to just keep driving. (Journalist)

I work in a bureau situation and cover a large geographical area – we do a hell of a lot of travelling. And so a lot of our hours are taken up with travelling. What you have to do is convince the news desk that you need to stay overnight rather than have to drive all the way back, and that depends on how far away you are from the office. Basically if it's more than five hours away you can convince them...there are so many different situations. You might drive two hours to get to a centre but you might drive around the town and adjoining area all day and adding the return journey that might be too much for you. (Journalist)

Journalists were also concerned about travelling alone,

catching public transport at night and the increase to risks associated with those circumstances.

I go out on my own to cover stories, generally travelling long distances and it's a concern for safety I think...if I was to have an accident. I can't share the driving. I also have to take my own car which isn't fitted out with safety gear, first aid kit, fire extinguisher, nothing like that. Not to mention just how crappy my car is...there are fleet cars but they are only for photographers. (Journalist)

Not having access to cab charges is real problem. If you work late it's vital for safety reasons that you catch a cab home, and yet if you for some reason have run out of money, or if you've been out of the office and unable to claim cab docket back, you may not be able to afford it. Then you get on public transport at 11.30pm after a really long day. (Journalist)

Several participants complained about the quality of vehicles they were travelling in. They spoke of brakes failing, doors not closing properly and petrol leakages. Although some organisations appeared more organised when it came to general maintenance, nearly all participants regarded maintenance systems as requiring improvement.

We have problems getting general maintenance on the cars. Just doing regular checks and services and brakes etc. They used to do it regularly but they've cut costs wherever they could and that's one of the things, they don't get that done for vehicles. (Journalist)

Participants identified a series of improvements that should be made for travelling arrangements. Good standards about travelling times, rest periods and not travelling alone would be of great benefit and assist in the elimination of fatigue and risk to personal safety. Standard procedures regarding the maintenance of vehicles would also assist in reducing risk.

2.1.3 Covering sensitive and dangerous stories

It is the job of the modern journalist to cover emotionally difficult stories. News media workers are directly involved with people who have either experienced great trauma or are exposed to that trauma themselves. Participants had been present at some catastrophic events in recent years including: the aftermath of the Newcastle earthquake, the Bali bombing, the Jakarta Australian Embassy bombing, 9/11 in New York, the Fiji coup, the Iraq war, and violent clashes in East Timor, Bougainville, Chechnya and Sarajevo. Some journalists also attended graphic and difficult court hearings, 'death knocks'

(interviewing relatives of recently deceased people), and fatal road accident sites. Some participants described having their personal safety threatened.

One of the other big things is going on death knocks. I've had someone try to punch me in the mouth through a screen door. (Journalist)

I've been chased by someone with a broom...you can ring the editor and explain that they are hostile, that you didn't get the quote and they'll tell you to go back and try again. (Journalist)

They can be so distraught or drunk that they want to hurt you. Sometimes they send one person rather than two so you are even more exposed. (Journalist)

All of these difficult and emotional stories impact on those who attend. Participants described some intense psychological reactions. In all cases, participants identified that there are some stories that bring with them extreme stress.

The company's attitude is get the story no matter what. I had to go and confront a guy who had shot someone 16 times. I'm stepping over the door step to get the story and the photo. I was scared. I was scared. There is absolutely no debriefing when you come back. (Journalist)

Fatalities are hard. You get wound up by it. We go to a lot of them...there is no set procedure for dealing with it. It should be your own choice...but there is no procedure for counselling or disaster debriefing. (Journalist)

The double fatal I did with the two kids, it's just awful stuff and you don't get any support at all. It's just go out and get that story, it's on page one and that's it. That stuff is really tough...The court reporter has had some really nasty ones – child sexual assault – and he comes back straight to his desk. We're not offered any counselling. I still remember that day of the double fatal and coming back to do an interview with Miss Australia. And you don't even get asked, 'Are you OK?' (Journalist)

I covered the {disaster} and that was the hardest thing I've ever done. It catches up with you and it colours your whole life. When other people are doing their mourning, you're working, you know, doing the post mortem, working all hours – and no time to take it in for yourself then. Just adding to the images and terrible stories that you store up – that you don't forget. (Journalist)

I went up to the Grafton bus smash with a journo. We were

standing next to the bodies when the tarp that was covering them blew off – we were just standing there looking at these bodies. The emergency services blokes suggested we should have counselling. We were too macho for that. (Photographer)

Participants recognised that some stories are hard to tell for personal reasons and this is inevitable in their jobs. However, several (although not all) felt that counselling and support services should be made available and used much more than they currently are.

I don't know whether it works {counselling} but if it helps with insomnia and bad dreams, actually helps with those things, I'd give it a go...I've taken sleeping tablets but I'm not popular {at home} for it. (Journalist)

We do have access to a counselling service external to the organisation but I don't know how many people use it or know about it. (Journalist)

The sheer pressure to 'get the story' or get the best picture was intense. Under this kind of pressure participants described situations where poor decisions with regard to safety were made.

I've been in a situation when I was out with a photographer on another story and we saw this bushfire and he's taken the Toyota Corolla, you know the big white company car, and stops in the middle of the track with the fire trucks fighting further down the road. He hops out and starts getting his equipment together to take a photograph. This big teatree just exploded. Literally, within the space of seconds, we went from seeing smoke to seeing full fires. It was coming so fast which is why the fire-ees (sic) were trying to come back down the track. Luckily, we managed the three point turn to get out of their way. That's just lack of common sense but there is this pressure put on the photographers to get the shot. (Journalist)

Several participants discussed the viability of refusing a job they considered too dangerous or personally difficult. The consensus was that pressure to 'get the story' clouded the judgement of the individual. They also recognised that the capacity to refuse a job was dependent on your position within an organisation or the nature of your employment relationship.

I had a horrible experience in '94 and psychologically I can't bring myself to go into a bushfire anymore like I used to...So I think you should be able to decide whether you go in or not. I just won't go now. But the photographer has to. There is this pressure on them to get the picture. (Journalist)

You can say no to some destinations. There are places and

circumstances I won't go. And I'll say no...It's harder for some people to say no because they might need the work, I suppose. (Camera operator)

I know I can negotiate what I need to. Not to do this, but to do that. So that's what I do. But I might not be a good judge of what's safe in all circumstances. I'm not going to admit I won't do some hard things. That's the nature of the job. You just do them and worry about it later. (Journalist)

2.2 Work conditions

Participants identified a series of environmental factors that increased their likelihood of working unsafely or increased the risk of detriment to their health. Poor ergonomic conditions combined with fast paced work led to some workers experiencing ill health, particularly sub-editors. Most workers in the field experienced some discomfort due to awkward physical conditions. Exposure to dangerous chemicals and to disease was a particular issue for people who worked overseas. Ill-defined or inadequate policies and practices regarding safety equipment (personal protective wear, etc) also raised risk levels. Hardly any workers had general safety training, although this was regarded as useful if well designed. Some, but not all, relevant workers were given targeted safety training.

2.2.1 Poor ergonomics at work

Participants worked in a variety of 'sites' with different kinds of equipment and types of technology that are essential for the work they perform. For some, it meant workstations in an office building (a fixed office) with ergonomics ranging from poor to adequate. For others, it meant a chair and shared desk in parliamentary press galleries or at courts, etc (a satellite office). At those locations, the quality of the ergonomics was poor and the risk to workers' health and safety increased. For most photographers and television/radio crews, the situation was often mobile and they experienced the least control over ergonomics and associated safe work practices.

Even at 'fixed office' workplaces with occupational health and safety committees present, the onus was on the employee to be knowledgeable and active when it came to securing an ergonomically sound workstation. However, workers rarely had the necessary control over decision making to get what they needed, particularly when it came to spending budget money on upgrading equipment.

A guy working with us at the moment brings in his own mouse

because ours are so unreliable. You have to constantly be opening them up and cleaning them out. There is much better equipment available on the market but no-one is willing to spend the money. When you know exactly what you want to ask for and you're willing to put in the ground work, you can get better equipment. But it is not a matter of course. It's a struggle. (Graphic artist)

They've been known to keep machines on the floor, hidden from view, so no-one will get ideas about asking for an upgrade. It's crazy. (Journalist)

Organisational factors also impacted on their capacity to maintain the safe standards they were aware of. These were issues that they found even more difficult to change.

Hot desking (changing desks frequently) is a problem because you continuously lose any safety equipment you have been lucky enough to acquire – such as telephone headphones, wrist rests and a decent mouse. (Sub-editor)

Only once in five years has someone come to check our personal workspaces for ergonomics. And it was really useful. But lots of people have arrived since then so it would be good to have a policy where it happened regularly. (Journalist)

We don't even have a sick bay area, do we? Or just a place to have a break from the screen. Nowhere private or for recreation. So you don't feel like there is anywhere legitimate that you can take a break. Because they don't really want you to take a break. (Journalist)

We need to be able to take advantage of new and improved technology to manage the risks. (Graphic artist)

General consensus was that there were definitely ways to improve the ergonomics at workstations and within fixed offices but that management needed to either hand over more control to workers (in terms of work design and access to new technology) or become far more proactive in managing the situation – dealing with the issue at an organisational level rather than on a case by case basis.

The situation in satellite offices appears to be worse. Journalists are often housed in spaces that are not owned or managed by the employer. However, the employer is still legally responsible for the health and safety of the worker. Reluctance to spend money and improve ergonomics on the part of the employer appears to be more pronounced when it comes to addressing sub-standard furnishings, space,

equipment, technology and general environmental conditions at satellite offices.

...the court reporters' office at NSW Supreme Court at Queens Square is a health hazard. There is no ventilation, it's cramped and full of piles of papers, there are about six news organisations sharing a small office, there's not much equipment. (Journalist)

Court reporting means you work off your lap. The places we work in are really badly equipped, or you're in court with a pad on your lap, looking down scribbling. It takes its toll on you. Stiff necks, writer cramp. (Journalist)

A combination of factors increases the risk to worker health and safety in these situations – the existence of a third party (eg, the parliament or the court), the restrictions on the use of some technology (ie, recording devices in courts, etc), the pace of work generally required in this kind of reporting, and the physical distance of the workers to direct supervision. Just as solutions to fixed office problems need to be dealt with at an organisational level, it was thought that issues at satellite offices required a joint and standard response by all the news bodies involved. Clearly, from the workers' perspective, this was something that would benefit from trade union involvement.

It is the nature of news media work that tasks are undertaken outside of the office and 'in the field'. Under these circumstances, mobile offices are constructed where work that might otherwise take place at a workstation can be performed. For example, photographers download and file images, correspondents and crews edit and produce program material for television and radio, and then send it through to the network. The lack of formal workstations under the direct (ie, physical) supervision and management of the employer means that, in practice, there are higher expectations that workers manage their day to day health and safety. However, the ultimate responsibility is the employer's and there were significant issues detailed by participants that required management action to comply with safe standards.

Photographers now work out of their cars, they don't have a desk at the office. We have laptops that we work on. I have tried every conceivable way to work on that laptop, sitting in the gutter, with it on my lap, resting against the dash. (Photographer)

Using a laptop in the car to file photos from the road was also

a hazard, because it has to be plugged in the cigarette lighter to get power – to use the laptop you have to twist your body around, often for long periods of time. (Photographer)

A photographer and I were out on a story and had nowhere to file from. We had to convince the owner of a bottle shop to let us use his phone line, then we had to sit on the floor at the back of the shop for hours to file the story and pics. (Journalist)

It's not just from carrying heavy weights, it's also getting into and holding awkward positions to take shots and get sound. (Camera operator)

It was pointed out by a participant that police vehicles have custom made work stations within them that allow for a more ergonomically sound set up. This was considered to be one response that could be adopted for news workers who are working in cars, especially those, like photographers, who are permanently based in a car.

2.2.2 Working in contaminated or infected areas

Some participants spoke of having to enter contaminated locations to cover news events. One cameraman described going to Chernobyl a year after the nuclear power accident at a time when there was not much information about the implications of exposure to radiation. Another described going to the Tokyo subway in the week following the release of the chemical warfare agent, sarin nerve gas. It was also unclear to this worker what risks were involved with entering the area. The consensus was that the risk management strategy was lacking – in the words of a participant: 'they send you in and worry about the consequences later'. No-one in this focus group considered this a reasonable approach. At the least, they wanted to be making informed assessments about what the risks might be and on that basis make decisions about whether they would go.

2.2.3 Exposure to 'exotic' diseases

Several participants knew work mates who had contracted diseases in other countries while working for their media network. In some cases, those diseases were permanently disabling. Like policies on exposing workers to chemical contaminants, it was believed that the general approach was to deal with the problems when and if they emerged. It was also noted that medicals and inoculations were received as a matter of standard procedure for directly employed staff. However, the responsibility for those matters rested with freelancers, including medical insurance coverage.

2.2.4 Inadequate and ad hoc safety training

Journalists, photographers and camera crews in metropolitan and regional Australia work on bushfire stories. Whilst the majority of news workers in the focus groups had received bushfire training, others had not and were still expected to attend the scene if the need arose.

I haven't received the training. We were issued a memo at the beginning of bushfire season saying, 'Crews it looks like it's going to a very hot bushfire season. Make sure you have the appropriate gear.' A very general thing stuck up on a notice board, stating the obvious...You could be out doing another story wearing stockings and high heels and you've got to be there. (television journalist)

Fire safety training is available from the Rural Fire Service. Once you've done the training, they accredit you and as long as you have the equipment – overalls, boots, goggles, gloves – you are allowed in the fire zone, in the fire truck...But not enough of us have done the training. And the company is whinging about having to pay for the boots. (Journalist)

Workers going into volatile and hostile environments emphasised the need for specific training for dealing with dangerous situations. Whilst employees invariably received some form of specific safety training before entering war zones, there was less evidence of similar training for employees working in dangerous environments within Australia. In practice, experience as well as training were regarded as critical prerequisites for minimising risk, though these were not always the criteria management used to select people for the task.

Often junior staff are sent to cover these events. They are expected to have the same kind of knowledge about crowds, violence and police as someone with 20 years experience. (Journalist)

Some of it is counter intuitive to someone inexperienced. You think the police will help, you think that if people know you are from the media and you're not taking sides that you'll be OK. What they don't get is that people don't like you because they know you are from the paper. They don't want their photo in the paper. Or they want the photos you are taking or they just hate you these days...it has gotten worse. (Photographer)

We do hostile environment training. It's done by an external company. We've had different companies doing it and it has been a mixed quality...it's important to have someone who knows the environment. Not just some cowboys, SAS on long service leave. (television and radio journalist)

Mostly they ask when you last did your training. And if you need it then you get it. (Sound recordist)

According to participants, there are no procedures established to provide new recruits with basic safety training. On several occasions throughout the focus groups, people indicated circumstances where basic training, both occupationally based and general, would be beneficial. For example, training in manual handling and back care for television crews and photographers; basic ergonomic training for desk-based workers, particularly sub-editors; and bushfire and dangerous location training for journalists.

Nor was there evidence of training for experienced workers working with new recruits.

Photographers are sent to cover fires with cadets – what do you do if the cadet freaks out and needs to get out of there? Do you drive them out or do you stay and do the job? (Photographer)

It was thought that training and standard safety procedures designed for supervisors would also be beneficial for circumstances like those described above.

2.2.5 Lack of personal protective equipment

Personal protective equipment (PPE) is a critical aspect of managing safety risk in many circumstances. Many complaints were made about the quality, quantity and suitability of PPE to attend bushfires.

One of the biggest things is bushfires where we have to go right to the front line to get the shots. Journos have to be there as well as cameramen. We don't have the proper gear. Fire fighters actually laugh at us. We've got these dodgy overalls and they are flammable. (Journalist)

We've got most of the gear but we don't have enough for practical use. We have to leave it in the car but sometimes the photographer is out in the car and your gear's in it. (Journalist)

This is the perfect example of what we are up against. I had to fight to get some overalls for us, for the journalists...No-one knows the basic rules for what you shouldn't wear to a fire. (Journalist)

We've got the boots but they're the wrong size. Does that matter? Probably, don't you think? (Journalist)

The thing about the overalls for the bushfires is that the fire fighters rely on us having the proper equipment. They can't be worrying about us as well or risking themselves more. We've

only got two sets of gear to cover all sizes amongst the photographers and the journalists. (Journalist)

These problems were regarded as easy to fix. Some participants felt a designated safety officer responsible for complying with the standards set by the Rural Fire Service for PPE was a basic requirement.

Workers posted into violent zones described PPE that they took with them. It included flak jackets, helmets and boots. There was some discussion about when PPE was appropriate. According to an experienced journalist, the dangers associated with wearing obvious PPE are sometimes greater than going without. In Iraq, at the moment, it identifies you as a Westerner and potential target for kidnapping. As this correspondent further explained, 'Even putting your seatbelt on is like having a sign on your forehead that says "Westerner".' The consensus was that having PPE is critical but equally important is being informed about when and how it should be used. This highlighted the importance of security intelligence and cultivating the use of good local 'fixers' who understand the political, social, cultural and practical business of news collection in the region.

2.3 Employment Arrangements

The most reported cause of risk to worker health and safety across all focus groups was the increasing incidence of work intensification. All participants complained of OH&S problems as a result of extended and or intensive work hours. It was described over and over that management preference was to avoid overtime, travel and training costs, so pressure was applied on journalists and other workers to do more work either within the standard hours or by working extra, often unpaid, hours. Reductions in staffing levels, whilst clearly resulting in work intensification problems, also increased risk to personal safety, particularly for workers in volatile locations. Shiftwork was also identified as directly increasing worker fatigue and stress.

2.3.1 Intensive and extended working hours

Increased work intensification had two specific impacts on risk to worker health and safety: negative detriment to health as a result of fatigue, and increase in the possibility of injury or accident when fatigue combined with other potentially hazardous practices and situations, for example, driving a vehicle or working in a war zone.

Several participants, especially those working on rural and regional newspapers, talked about doing much more work in every hour than ever before. At several work sites, staff numbers had been reduced whilst the number of publications or the number of pages in each publication had increased. Consequently, fewer people were producing more work.

The problem is not about the length of hours, it's about what you have to cram into them. What you actually have to produce and retain some standard of quality. (Print journalist)

The staff numbers have gone down but we're also doing extra publications. Technology hasn't really made up for that. It's not really any quicker, there is just a lot more we have to do. (Print journalist)

...nobody cares until the next day how many mistakes you've made in those stories, how much you tried to churn out, as long as those pages are up and ready to go on the press and we're out of there on time. And then the next day your backside gets whipped. (Print journalist)

High expectations placed on media workers by management were evident across all focus groups. According to participants, this pressure to save resources contributed significantly to the stress they were under in their daily work. They felt co-opted into working longer and more intensive hours with little concern for impacts on their health, safety and general quality of life.

If you're away working on a story you end up pushing yourself really hard. When you go away they expect you to do as many stories as possible to make the trip worthwhile. I often get sick when I get back from a trip because I've pushed it so hard. (Print journalist)

They just keep pushing you and pushing you until you feel as if you will have a nervous breakdown. (Print journalist)

We are always driving under stress, rushing from one job to another...sometimes it's as late as midnight by the time we get home, then you have to be at work again the next morning. (Print journalist)

Just general stress levels are really bad. There isn't enough people to do it really. We've had a minor increase in staff after a period of attrition but no way does it match up to the increase in workload. We produce more publications...There were a lot of people resigning or looking for a new job because it is so bad. (Print journalist)

People are chucking sickies just to get out of the situation. And it's causing a lot of infighting. (Print journalist)

Journalists/producers working in radio also complained of reductions in the hours in which they were expected to produce their programs. This was a trend across a particular organisation and resulted in high levels of stress and fatigue for those workers who continued to provide a quality program despite loss of resources.

The stories you hear are unbelievable. People are being told to absorb other programs but they can't write down the actual hours they work...People will do what they are told. (Radio journalist)

Other program makers explained that new job tasks had arrived with multi-media technology, adding to their already growing workloads.

The programs are different now. The programs are much more intensive. It is just current affairs, no music. The internet, we have to do ourselves. We are everything from technician to producer to presenter to researcher. (Radio journalist)

Work intensification can also combine with other work practices to increase the risk of injury to a person. For example, working for long periods of time without rest at a computer screen can be the cause for significant pain and potential injury. As these sub-editors explain, the pressures to achieve multiple deadlines can be extreme and require work to be done very fast, working more than one screen at a time.

As a sub-editor, you spend a lot of time doing desk-based work. Hours and hours at a time. Sometimes working on two screens at the same time. You know, working on this one and then swinging around, leaning over to work on the other one. I was having real trouble with it physically. Doing the work and doing other things, you know, at home, became hard. (Sub-editor)

You move from one screen to the other all day and sometimes all night. And the system crashes and you have to do rework. So add on more hours. But you have to keep going because it's going to print. You look and feel like you've been run over by a bus...eyes hanging out of your head. You get that strange vision where you can't see anything that's not on the monitor. (Sub-editor)

The subs always appear slightly deranged. Sitting there in front of a blinking screen. I get headaches and they don't go after you stop working. You can have them for days, on your days off. It comes from your neck, I think. (Sub-editor)

There were several sub-editors in the focus groups. More than half complained of significant injuries associated with sub-editing work, specifically the long and pressured hours at computers.

We're working to strict deadlines and spending the whole shift in front of the screen, doing an enormous amount of mouse work. I reported RSI problems to the company and they instructed people to take their breaks. But there is not enough time with our deadlines and the volume of work to be able to. (Sub-editor)

I put in a claim for RSI and it was disputed by the company. It was really unpopular. But all these other people were coming up to me and whispering that they had been suffering from RSI for months...in the end I withdrew the claim. It was too hard. (Sub-editor)

For news and current affairs crews and journalists working away from their home city, inside and outside Australia, the issue of extended hours becomes more extreme. For example, in the case of a journalist who previously filed for either radio or television and now files for both, a working day can still be going after 20 hours. For others working in television, a working day can easily be anything between ten and 15 hours every day for several weeks with no break.

Most of our trips would be three weeks and we'd get a week off either side. But while you're there you'd never work less than ten hours a day, every day...Ten hours is a short day. (Television journalist)

In some organisations, employers were taking on new staff without adequate training in their field. This contributed to already high levels of work intensification and subsequent stress for current staff who didn't have the time to train them, often resulting in high turnover of new recruits, further exacerbating the problems of work intensification and staff shortages.

New recruits are coming in completely unprepared for the reality of a working rural paper. From our point of view, just the checking and rechecking what they do adds even more to an already unrealistic workload. (Print journalist)

I was pretty much working a twelve hour day every day last year. But it's kind of my own fault though. (Radio news editor)

I don't know! You're expected to cover stories, train staff, roster them, edit news stories...that's not your fault. (Radio news reporter)

Well, yeah, if there was more training for other staff then maybe that would take the pressure off me. (Radio news editor)

The single biggest thing is workload. They are now employing all these 20-year-olds on short contracts because they are cheap but that leaves the pressure on all staff to do the rework. (Television journalist)

There was also some evidence in other areas that employers were concentrating on deployment rather than development, particularly in the overseas reporting arena. Several workers said that the best way into that sector was to work on contract overseas and training was the responsibility of the individual. Only after getting experience and training on the job was it likely that direct employment would take place. This practice appears to have increased since the ABC, in particular, has reduced its internal training programs. This phenomenon clearly has other implications for the profession. In terms of good occupational health and safety practice, these kinds of new employees are commencing in the industry unaware of the standards that are provided for and required of directly employed counterparts. It is feared that, over time, standards might diminish for all.

Participants felt quite strongly that intense hours, as well as extended hours, made them feel unwell and created difficulties for them at work and in their lives beyond work. It is broadly accepted that working long hours (generally in excess of 48 hours a week) has negative impacts on health and safety. Participants discussed a variety of impacts on their health and safety. Considerable trouble sleeping after working long shifts, or in different time zones, with inadequate time off to recuperate and fatigue impacting detrimentally on work performance and home life. Working intensely, without breaks has also been shown to have adverse health and safety effects. There is ample evidence that working before computer screens, using keyboards and mouse operated VDUs for extended periods without breaks is a danger to workers, in terms of soft tissue damage and upon eye sight. Participants also described ongoing problems with headaches, RSI (repetitive strain injuries) and debilitating back and neck injuries due to sub-editing for long hours without respite. Stress, although not always named as such, was a manifest problem for most

people in the focus groups. Deadlines, pressure to work harder and expectations all contributed to worker discomfort.

Workers were realistic about work pressure and the need to sometimes work intensively and beyond standard hours. As one journalist said:

You're always going to get time pressures as a journalist. It's just part of the job. (Print journalist)

However, the view of most participants was that hours and deployment and training of staff could be better managed than they currently are. They thought that leaving such matters to be dealt with informally impacted negatively upon workers with less power to negotiate. It also put the onus on employees to self-manage in situations where management decisions to reduce resources created new problems that were beyond worker control. There was widespread agreement that management 'would take what they could get' and that the balance is unfavourable for workers in terms of their health and safety and, consequently, their quality of life. As one participant remarked:

...the hours can be better managed, for sure. I wouldn't be asking for anything special, just the standard we worked to four or five years ago would be a vast improvement. It's a bit tough though because I'm sick and tired of having the no-win argument. I'm too tired to push back. I just keep... What am I going to do? Leave? What else would I do with my life now? I could sleep for a year, and then what? (Journalist)

2.3.2 Working alone or with reduced crews

Low staff numbers also contributed considerably to increased vulnerability when working in volatile situations. It is the nature of modern news collection that news workers can find themselves in dangerous circumstances to cover volatile events. It is often the volatility of the event that attracts news interest. Participants recounted their experiences in war zones, at demonstrations, protests, accidents and sporting events, when they felt that their safety and, in some cases, their health was further compromised by reduced or low staffing levels. Whilst there was acceptance that some dangers are inevitable and beyond the control of local management, it was strongly felt that significant risks to health and safety would be minimised by a return to reasonable staffing levels.

(television and radio journalist) We {journalist and camera operator} were concentrating on the hostages being held in front

of us. All of a sudden they grabbed the hostages, ran to their cars, and drove off. We turned around to see about a hundred people running across the field towards us with AK47s and rocket propelled grenade launchers. We hadn't noticed they were coming because we were facing forward. (Camera operator) You see, the sound recordist stands side on and has a different vision. They would have had much more chance of seeing them coming.

(Camera operator) You used to work with a producer, a journalist, a cameraman and a sound recordist. Four people would work together. Now there is mostly two, the journalist and the cameraman. (Camera operator) That's what we need, a three person crew. That way you share the workload, you get more sleep. And you have less trouble.

(Camera operator) You need someone else there to gauge the mood. If people are getting fractious, you want someone to pick that up. (Sound recordist) Or just have an extra set of eyes. An extra pair of eyes and an extra pair of legs. You need these things for safety.

Competition in news collection and the drive to 'get the story told' also contributed to increasing risk. This could mean that journalists would be exposed to grave dangers by working alone, even when this breached accepted standards at the organisational level.

People {journalists} are under pressure to shoot their own stuff and it is very dangerous work. (Television and radio journalist)

We are never supposed to work alone but it does happen. You need to get in somewhere fast but it does make you more vulnerable. (Radio and television journalist)

One-man-banding in Iraq...I think only the Australians are doing it. (Radio and television journalist)

Crew reductions also impacted on workers' capacity to cope with the emotionally and psychologically difficult experiences. Participants frequently covered stories where they came into direct contact with violence and death. A participant explained that the process of coming to terms with some experiences was much easier when shared, especially overseas and isolated from supervision and family and friends.

You don't want to have to sit there on your own saying to yourself, well, that was awful. You want to debrief with someone when you've seen something awful. (Camera operator)

Metropolitan print and television technicians reported working twelve hour shifts. They believed that their patterns of hours contributed to various symptoms of ill health due to lack of valuable sleep and limited opportunity to recuperate before commencing work again.

Sometimes you feel as if your eyeballs are about to start bleeding after another twelve hour shift, especially when you know you're back on at 9am the next morning. (Print journalist)

Technicians in radio, who had recently had rosters change to make way for twelve hour shifts and different roster patterns, had significant concerns over impacts to their health. One participant described working an average of 50 hours per week over the last three weeks and regularly working seven days in a row with two days off before recommencing work. Some shifts were as long as twelve hours and others as short as four. He argued the irregularity of the hours, the long stretches of work without days off and the rotation in and out of afternoon and night shifts was causing him great fatigue and distress. His sleep was affected and he felt generally unwell.¹ It was also clearly causing him significant stress, expressed mostly through anger at what he saw as rostering incompetence.

They've got no idea what they are doing. They lied about how it was going to work. They said one thing and it's just a bloody disaster. (Radio technician)

Other journalists worked shorter shifts but were also affected by fatigue after working nights, which was sometimes exacerbated by working alone.

We work very intense eight hour shifts without breaks and that adds to fatigue...the main issue I've had with fatigue comes on the overnight shift which is pretty much a solo shift – you don't have any back up – and I've often found that you might have to finish at 4am and you'll be driving home and might go into a microsleep. This is happening to my colleagues as well. It's happened to me at least on one occasion when I was driving and it's quite a frightening experience. You are temporarily asleep while driving on a busy highway. (Journalist)

Several participants working in both regional and metropolitan workplaces were concerned about having to walk to their cars at the end of some of the later shifts.

2.3.3 Shiftwork

1. There has been ample research into the impact of fatigue on workers (and their families) due to irregular hours patterns. What these shift workers described parallels experiences in other industries.

I know some people who are worried about leaving here at night. Walking to the car can be pretty hair-raising. (Journalist)

We've had people threatening violence over the phone when you've written a story including them. It might be on the public record and legally covered, you know, but that doesn't mean people don't get angry. There was a case here recently and it was getting to the stage where you get worried. Even walking to your car after business hours. (Journalist)

If you come in the afternoon you can't get parking and when you finish at 10pm it can be dangerous around some of the streets around here. (Journalist)

At a metropolitan workplace, parking is available on site but as it is 'first come first served' those people working later shifts find it very difficult to get parking close to the building. Management has to date refused to review the parking policy despite requests to do so. Participants were very concerned about the immediate danger of micro-sleeping amongst shiftworkers and advised that taxis should be provided for those on night shifts.

2.4 Employment Relationships

There were two major issues related to employment relationships. There was evidence of highly volatile relations between management and workers at a particular workplace. This appeared to have a critical impact on stress levels. The other major issue was the increase of almost all risks for individuals contracted rather than employed. That 'distancing' of the employment relationship contributed significantly to the risks workers described.

2.4.1 Lack of trust between management and workers

For some workers in one section of an organisation, the critical health and safety issue was stress associated with what participants described as working with an 'intimidatory' management. The levels of stress appeared extreme. What follows are just a selection of quotes illustrating the extent of the problem, the cause being attributed to managerial style and specific employment practices adopted by a management whose primary focus was cost cutting.

For me it is the stress of the managerial attitude...what's happening is quite scandalous. The abuse of staff, intimidation, threats to people in private, when they are most vulnerable...If you are nice, you get more budget. If you are not nice, your budget gets cut. (Journalist)

There's a guy who's had a heart attack and he'll have another heart attack soon. I can see it coming...and the pressure on him. The intimidation on him...I can't stand it. (Journalist)

The stress is just incredible. These people are...when you talk to them they shake...they just tremble...it's unbelievable. These people get stressed because of the way people are treated, their staff. They employ someone, they lose them, they lose control, their integrity is hurt...they are really stressed. I mean the environment is just incredibly shocking. (Journalist)

There are a lot of cases against management...but it has gone so far that people who have complained about harassment are being threatened with dismissal. (Journalist)

Participants believed the answer was to change the management culture rather than continuing to send workers to health professionals to deal with symptoms of stress.

2.4.2 Contract and freelance work

It was generally felt by those with experience that the risk associated with news media work was greater for people employed indirectly as contractors (also known as freelancers or stringers). The lack of employment relationship for the contractor meant they had little direct supervision and the pressure upon them to 'go beyond the call' was greater due to strong industry competition. They worked longer hours, almost always worked alone on jobs in the field and were much more likely to need to be multitasked than their directly employed counterparts. Contractors had to arrange their own insurances, organise their own transport and travel, provide their own safety equipment and assess their own risks. Failure to get the 'product', for many of these workers, means not getting paid, whether there were mitigating health and safety concerns or not. As such, people in more tenuous or distant employment relationships were far more likely to absorb unmanaged risks.

A freelance journalist who worked on a commission basis for an Australian media outlet described the experience he had on his last job. He is one of the 'new breed' contracted by the organisation. He works on his own, shooting footage, recording the sound, producing and telling the story.

My last story, it absolutely killed me. I was sick for ten days after that...but I'm not actually complaining. From Thursday afternoon to Wednesday evening, so six days, I probably slept three hours and hardly ate...In six years that was the worst ever...it killed me – I was sick as a dog for a week after that

and still actually feel that my whole time clock got knocked out by that job and I walked out and said I'm not going to do another story for a year...that was intense. But I've got no complaints. My own decision to go, I knew it was going to be like that and I got paid extremely well for it...I'm not complaining at all. I thrive on it. I couldn't work with a cameraman, wouldn't like it. I like working alone, I like the intensity of it...I don't want to be hanging around here when I'm not working...It suits my character. (Freelance journalist)

And in terms of health and safety in hostile situations, like war zones:

(Interviewer: Do you think that you are less safe than someone going in there under different circumstances, with an employer and with a full or even partial crew?) Yes, no doubt about it...you've got no-one looking over you. You are more vulnerable because you're arranging your own meetings, can't have someone knowing you haven't come back from a meeting. You're making decisions on your own, you've got a lot to juggle...no producer, no cameraman, no sound. (Freelance journalist)

Some people felt that safety standards for all media workers could be compromised when this kind of risk-shifting practice is widespread. There was also a strong feeling that less experienced, less secure personnel, entering the industry via freelance work were even more at risk than their more seasoned contract colleagues.

A focus group participant illustrated the extreme risk-shifting behaviour of one media organisation's management. A fledgling freelance cameraman had been told by a commercial television news editor that if he returned from a war zone with good footage they may (or may not) purchase it from him. No discernible contract was entered into but, nevertheless, the young man intended to go to Iraq. He had no experience, no training to deal with hostile environments, no back up, no employer, and had never travelled overseas. Concern was expressed by participants that practices of this kind create untenable risk to inexperienced workers.

There was also concern that contracting and local engagement may well be a trend that is becoming entrenched as employers continue to cut costs and this type of entry into the industry might become the norm. They were concerned about the implications for their own jobs but also for the health and safety of 'unattached' news media workers.

Another big worry is that they might just start using overseas

people and leave staff at home. Cut them loose and just use stringers...it's not fair how they treat overseas staff and contractors. It's not equal. (Camera operator)

After some discussion in the focus groups, it was generally agreed that some standards for the way freelance work is managed are important for establishing standards for health and safety across the board. In one group, the consensus was that, at the very least, employers should be commissioning work rather than buying uncommissioned work on the open market. This might, to some degree, force media organisations to share in the risk and become actively involved in issues of health and safety management for those workers, especially if industry wide standards were established and enforced.²

2. The International News Safety Institute has developed a safety code outlining a series of standards for journalists in hostile environments. Some, but not all, Australian media outlets are signatory to the code. As yet there is no evidence regarding the effectiveness of the code.

3. SUMMARY

According to the majority of workers in the focus groups, the single most significant issue was the incidence and impact of negative stress. It was a manifest symptom of extended and intensive working hours, particular patterns of shiftwork, poor relationships with management, emotionally taxing stories and working in volatile environments. Stress was often exacerbated by under-resourcing, lack of supervision, fatigue, lack of control over work content and work flows, and working in isolation. Employers are more likely to respond to the symptoms of a stressed workforce or individual than eliminate or mitigate the causes of stress.

It was very common for participants to complain of high risk resulting from a combination of factors. It seems there is a 'multiplier effect' that increases the level of OH&S risk experienced by many news media workers. For example, the act of word processing might in itself be considered a low risk task. However, if that word processing is performed for long durations without breaks, the risk of injury (RSI) increases. Add the pressure of multiple deadlines, poor ergonomic equipment and extended hours, the risk of injury and detriment to health increases even further. Driving a car brings with it risk but that risk increases significantly when the driver is fatigued and has just completed a nightshift. Working in a war zone is inherently risky to personal safety but participants felt strongly that those risks grow when there are fewer people working together, and to an unacceptable level when they are working alone. There was no evidence that assessment of multiple risks is occurring. This is not to say that they are not happening, rather that workers experiencing these risks are unaware of them, which to a large degree limits the effectiveness of any management strategies.

Industry competition was also a recurring driver for risk-taking activity. Participants were much more likely to take questionable risks when they were under pressure to 'break the story' or 'get the photo'. Even greater competition is faced by some contractors who compete against other individuals to 'sell' their work in the news market place. Participants described specific circumstances where the responsibility for OH&S risk was shouldered exclusively by the contractor.

Overall workers from the ABC appeared to enjoy the most 'managed risk' in terms of their OH&S than any of their commercial and most of their SBS counterparts. There was much more evidence of explicit guidelines and standards for safety practice and safe work procedures. There was more safety training, more evidence of active safety committees and much less reported incidence of stress being experienced by workers who, in some cases, worked in the most 'volatile' overseas environments. However, work intensification was still regarded as a critical issue for ABC news and current affairs workers and it was evident that this had grown in significance as a result of staff reductions, in particular, reductions in camera crewing.

The group shouldering and 'self-managing' the greatest levels of risk were contract workers. According to participants, contracted work is an increasingly popular option for budget-conscious employers. If this is the case, then it is even more important to consider the OH&S issues of this group more closely than has been possible in this report.



245 Chalmers Street Redfern Sydney NSW 2016 Australia
Tel: (61) 2 9333 0911 Fax: (61) 2 9333 0933

www.alliance.org.au